

Book Review: Living in a Low-Carbon Society in 2050

by blog admin

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*What would it be like to live in a low carbon world? Governments may talk about reducing carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions by eighty per cent by 2050, but any pursuit of significant change will require drastic changes in either our energy supply or our lifestyles, or preferably a combination of both. **Michael O'Regan** argues that although this book is not as intensive nor authoritative as it claims, for those thinking about moving to a low-carbon world, it is heartfelt, sincere and a worthwhile read.*



Living in a Low-Carbon Society in 2050. Horace Herring. Palgrave Macmillan. October 2012.

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Divided into three parts, concerning British government policies, case studies and speculative fiction, the very mixed group of authors in [Living in a Low-Carbon Society in 2050](#) largely agree that major technological, social, economic and political undertakings are required to reduce carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions in Britain by eighty per cent by 2050. While there is broad agreement as to the economic and technical feasibility of this reduction, the authors also acknowledge climate change is not a reality for all sectors of society and a low-carbon society remains a low priority for many.

The first part of the book relates to British government policy and politics and is arguably the best section in the book. By asking what a low carbon world might consist of and what it would mean to live well in a low-carbon British society, the book shows that a range of low carbon futures are feasible depending on choices made by government, businesses, community groups and individuals. However, the authors feel that British politicians lack the will needed for serious policy changes, even though many of the pathways identified depend on policy makers managing the transition to a low carbon society. It seems politicians are loathe to force upon their voters a world without cars, planes, conventional agriculture, land rights, borders and foreign holidays.

The authors broadly offer justification for strong leadership with the book editor, [Horace Herring](#), invoking Margaret Thatcher, as he demands strong government action and a radical Prime Minister to push through legislation to overcome hostile public attitudes, high carbon energy companies and a populist media. There is little discussion of policies that seek to maximise the potential speedy diffusion and deployment of clean technologies — policies that support open source innovation, investment and international cooperation. Meanwhile the question as to whether naïve interventionism will drive new inequalities or create new hierarchies is only partially answered.

The book goes on to look at present day case-studies of low-carbon living. These relate to housing (converting, retrofitting homes), the possible changes of climate change on British agriculture and a chapter by [Tanya Hawkes](#) that argues for environmental justice in the form of an “International Court of the Environment”. There are examples of individuals who feel the need to “do something” by renovating their houses. However, the given example of triple glazed windows at £18,000 is hardly solution that cuts across economic, legal, economic, institutional, cultural, social and political barriers. The cases in this chapter may have been better complemented with examples of successful low-carbon living such as [Transition Towns](#) or by addressing clean technology patent ownership issues that make [climate-friendly technologies](#)









unaffordable.

Part three of the book relates to speculative fiction, driven by four mildly utopian to dystopian stories that don't really connect the preceding sections of actual designs and practices to future utopias and dystopias about living in low-carbon societies. The weakest part of the book, the utopian and two dystopian stories, offer speculations about the future that are equally unappealing (but perhaps this is the point). Rather than opening up and exploring interesting tensions in contrasting visions of the future (centralised versus decentralised power), the reader is left with images of robo-gunes, eugenic quests, a robo-butler, a child climate refuge with extraordinary recall, a sausage festival and a couple who use DigiThimble's, speculative fiction may be best left to the genre from which it originates and deserves to stay.

While the book's focus, rather than technical or economic feasibility, was instead to imagine what kind and sort of political and social changes would be needed to live in a low carbon world and thereby persuade its readers to transition to that world. However, various scenarios solutions and pathways for doing so were not clearly laid out and became muddled over the course of the book. The authors largely agree the means to achieve a low-carbon future is unappealing, and they seem to have little confidence that British society will voluntarily chose to adapt to a world of restriction. The focus is on drastic policy interventions to make carbon matter in people's lifestyle decisions and return Britain to a time before rapid economic growth, population increases, chemical-intensive agriculture, and auto-mobility. The imagined futures do not seem to include free market policies or measures such as carbon trading, nuclear or (shale) gas, and therefore, the 'risk' of doing nothing often seems more appealing than the pathways suggested.

Given their lack of faith in people and politicians, there is a dystopian undercurrent in this book and a longing for epoch-making events such as extreme weather, a drastic fall in incomes, societal collapse, and climate refugees, in hopes these events might shock people and politicians into drastic change. It seems the Deepwater Horizon oil spill wasn't enough, as Horace Herring points to the tsunami in Japan and the damaged Fukushima nuclear power plant as the pathway to affect nuclear policy and overcome media and popular hostility to change.

While the book is not as intensive nor authoritative as it claims, for those thinking about moving to a low-carbon world, it is heartfelt, sincere and a worthwhile read. Likewise, it may help to confirm for many that the future is increasing volatile, uncertain and unknowable. This approach may encourage our societies and hopefully our politicians to make better decisions when adapting to technological, institutional and behavioural changes brought about by climate change.

Michael O'Regan worked alongside the National Tourism Development Authority of Ireland when he joined Gulliver – Ireland's Information and Reservation Service in 1997. He joined Wicklow County Tourism, as Marketing Executive in 1997 for three years before starting a PhD programme at the School of Sport and Service Management, University of Brighton, UK which he completed in 2011. He joined Dongbei University of Finance and Economics (DUFE), Dalian, China as Assistant Professor at its Global Institute of Management and Economics – Surrey International Institute. [Read reviews by Michael.](#)